

REBUTTAL TESTIMONY OF BOB VONDRASEK
ON BEHALF OF SOUTH AUSTIN COALITION COMMUNITY
COUNCIL DOCKET NO. 02-0706

Q1 Are you the same Bob Vondrasek who previously presented testimony in this matter?

A1 Yes, I am.

Q2 Have you read the pre-filed testimony of ComEd=s witnesses?

A2 Yes, I have read the testimony of Rene Gonzalez, Mark A. Falcone and Nancy Biondo.

Q3 Do you know Nancy Biondo?

A3 I do not. We never were introduced and she never introduced herself to me. Many of her statements about the Austin Bank Service Center are so inaccurate that it sounds like she never was there although it is possible that I will recognize her when I see her at the hearing.

Q4 Did you ever request a meeting with Nancy Biondo to discuss any concerns South Austin Coalition Community Council was having over the Center?

A4 No. As I stated I had not heard of Ms. Biondo before I read her testimony so I would not have thought to raise any concerns with her. Over the years, SACCC has developed numerous contacts with Com Ed. Because of our nearly day-to-day contact with Rene Gonzalez, I would be most likely to bring issues of this sort to his attention although we did not deal exclusively with Rene either.

Q5 Please address Ms. Biondo's comments regarding waits to see a cashier in the Center.

A5 Some of those statements are correct. I agree that a single line formed to see all of the cashiers who were actually open. At times, there could be as many as fifteen to twenty people in line.

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This was most likely to happen at the first and fifteenth of the month when people received their public benefits, Social Security or payroll checks. It is the case, even when this many people were waiting to see a cashier, that the line moved fairly quickly.

SACCC did not consider delays of this magnitude to see a cashier at the Center a big problem.

Q6 Please address Ms. Biondo's comments about the waits to see a Customer Information Representative particularly her observation that she never observed more than one customer waiting to see a CIR on page 4 of her testimony.

A6 That particularly statement is so inaccurate and so ridiculous that it makes me wonder if she actually ever was inside the Center. People waiting to see a CIR did not wait in line. Rather, they took a number and waited in a seating area that included fifteen or so chairs. On many occasions, those chairs were full, and sometimes people were also standing. Of course, this would only be at peak times, such as the first or fifteenth of the month when checks were received, when bills came out to the Austin community or when it was the season (generally the fall although also the summer those years when a cooling program was in operation) the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program operated. When we were taking those applications, the demand to see CIRs was double to triple normal demand. We took LIHEAP applications in the Center so at those times, some of the people in chairs would be waiting to see us not Com Ed. Still, it is hard to believe that even someone dropping by rarely, as seems the case with Ms. Biondo, would never have seen most of the chairs occupied once or twice. There certainly was an ebb and flow and there were times when no one at all was waiting to see a CIR so I do not doubt that someone who happened into the Center could see that as well.

Q7 Please address Ms. Biondo's testimony regarding the crediting of payments onto the Edison system when those payments are made at currency exchanges.

A7 First, Ms. Biondo is careful to use the term authorized agent.

Little of what she said applies to payment at currency exchanges that have not signed a contract with Edison. Many of the customers who paid at the Center now pay at currency exchanges, only some of which are authorized agents. Most customers are not aware of the differences. It is difficult to tell the difference and to know the importance of the distinction in terms of processing and cost. In fact, Com Ed seems to have made a mistake of this sort. In its community education materials distributed in late 2002, it listed one particular currency exchange as an authorized agent but retracted that when it investigated the case of a woman who was possibly overcharged (authorized agents can only charge fifty cents per transaction but this woman was charged one dollar (see the testimony of Anne Teague).

Q8 Please discuss Mr. Gonzalez's testimony and the GAP form in terms of an application for LIHEAP Emergency Services.

A8 Information contained in a printout showing certain information regarding a disconnected account, with the GAP form being an example of a form that had this data, is very important although I do agree that it is not required to process an application of LIHEAP-ES. First, I am sure Mr. Gonzalez would agree that some verification of the customer's account is required and the GAP form does provide this. At times the customer does not have sufficient documentation and must obtain it from Com Ed. Not having the Center open adds much additional delay to the process.

The paramount goal of the ES program is reconnection. It is not a bill payment program. In fact, even LIHEAP-ES money that has been committed to Com Ed on the person's behalf is not paid unless that payment leads to a reconnection. A printout, such as the GAP form, is an essential part of that process. It is true that this information may be supplied by Edison to CEDA down the road but having it initially speeds the process in what, by definition is an emergency. Many of the 98 agencies cited by Mr. Gonzalez merely process the paperwork and send it to CEDA. SACCC, on the other hand, works with the applicant to obtain reconnection. This often involves advising the person that raising

additional money on her own will be necessary as well as advocacy with Com Ed; knowing whether either is necessary comes from reviewing information contained in a printout. The sooner this begins, the sooner the household is restored to necessary utility service.

Q9 Please describe how processing applications for the regular LIHEAP program differs from processing applications for the ES program.

A9 An application for ES does not require as much information to be verified. Regular LIHEAP grants must be based on verification that includes: name, address, account number, rate classification and itemization of all charges (not just the total amount owed). The more information needed the more likely it is that an applicant will need documents from Com Ed, documents that are not quickly supplied without the ability to walk into the Center.

Q10 Do you agree with Com Ed witness Mark Falcone that Com Ed is no longer a local company?.

A10 No. Com Ed still is in the business of supplying electrical service at the most local level, to individuals. In fact, Edison's selling off its generating plant seems to make it more local than previously. I would have thought Com Ed would have agreed with my assessment as it, after all, actively participates in its local community by, for example in Chicago, supporting local charities, civic activities, etc.

Q11 Mr. Falcone cites a lack of complaints about the closing of other Service Centers throughout its service territory. Please respond to that.

A11 It may very well be true, and I have no reason to doubt his statement. SACCC's mission both as an entity and in the message it gives to the community, is not to just take it but to fight back when something bad occurs. If something is hurting the community and people in the community, SACCC opposes it as do many of the people on the westside of Chicago. There

certainly was much opposition and complaint about the closing of the Center. Despite short notice, more than 100 people attended a meeting opposing the closing in late 2002 and nearly as many presented opposition at a City of Chicago City Council subcommittee, where the elected representatives of the people also spoke against the closing.

Q12 In February 1997, Com Ed signed an agreement to keep the Center open. Please set out the events leading up to the negotiations that resulted in this agreement.

A12 SACCC has had a long history with Com Ed. Sometimes we oppose Com Ed's actions and sometimes we work with Com Ed. Over the many years it has focused on energy/utility issues, SACCC has developed a great number of contacts with Com Ed, including its current president Frank Clark, with whom SACCC's members and leaders have had a long personal/professional relationship. It is not clear exactly what Mr. Falcone refers to when he says (beginning on line 157) SACCC once again took its concerns about the future of the Austin Center to the ICC. I do not recall SACCC filing any complaint with the ICC in 1996 or 1997. In any event, the process began when we heard that Com Ed was planning to close the Center. We spoke to our contacts, I am not clear to whom it was, and verified that this was ComEd's intention. There was a big community meeting in opposition to the closing. In addition to that there was other public opposition. Com Ed proposed we discuss this; I believe it was one of the signatories to the agreement, quite possibly, John Hooker, who first raised that; we agreed to meetings.

Q13 Please discuss those negotiations.

A13 There were either two or three semiformal sessions. The signatories of the agreement certainly were there. Another person or two from Com Ed might have attended a session but no one else took a lead role. At the time we began the first session, it was clear that Com Ed was no longer proposing to close the Center. Closing the office, in fact, was never discussed. In terms of any assumption, the operating assumption was that as long as Com Ed remained a local distribution company there would be a walk-

in type office in the Austin community. All the discussion that I recall revolved around staffing levels and the presence of a supervisor; whether a supervisor would be at the office was a key point and probably the element most discussed. The agreement we signed February 27, 1997, continued the then-current staffing levels.

Q14 Please address Mr. Falcone's understanding on lines 167-170 of his testimony.

A14 I certainly have no idea where his understanding came from. In fact, closing the office at some future point was never raised or discussed at the sessions referred to in my answer #13. Similarly, closing the Austin Center before or after any other local office was not mentioned a single time by any Com Ed employee or by us.

Q15 Please respond to Mr. Falcone's discussion of the periodic meetings called for in the February 1997 agreement at page 10 of his testimony.

A15 I agree that some meetings were held although I do not believe we adhered to any rigid schedule such as exactly every three months. We looked at any major problems with the Center. At some point, SACCC and Com Ed agreed that the Center was generally running well so we stopped meeting. At no time did Com Ed request to reinstate these meetings pursuant to that provision of the agreement. Also, we never rejected a meeting, not that I recall Com Ed making such a request, to discuss the workings of the Center

Of course, over time we made comments to our contacts at Com Ed regarding the workings of the Center. As I testified previously, we had a wide variety of contacts within Edison and we saw them on many occasions, often when the main concern was not the Center, not just formal meetings to discuss the Center; at such times, the Center may very well have come up if either I or the Com Ed person I was talking with had a concern. Our main contact regarding the operation of the Center was Rene Gonzalez.

I and others at SACCC passed many comments on to him. The main area of our concern was formal guidelines being imposed on the CIR's, and even the Center supervisor, that served to override their good sense and experience in the use of individualized discretion. I also recall mentioning staff levels; this was primarily about the supervisor having other assignments that took the supervisor away from the Center. I also recall occasionally mentioning that vacations or leaves had left the office short of CIR's.

It is true that SACCC did not make a major issue of the staffing levels. There were several reasons for that. First, SACCC always tries to be positive and work cooperatively, making the best of a situation it encounters. Based on some of its experiences with SACCC, Com Ed might not totally believe this but, although willing to take that path, SACCC chooses its battles carefully and looks to confrontation as a last resort. Second, SACCC was happy to have the Center in its community and considered it an important asset even if it did not operate perfectly at all times in terms of long waits. It also helped SACCC perform its mission in terms of individual advocacy. Third, near the end of the Center's existence, when staffing levels were most problematic, there were rumors about the Center being closed and SACCC made the decision to tread lightly and not make waves. The big picture, then and now, was to keep the office open.

Q16 Please discuss the events leading up to the Center's closing in 2002.

A16 Com Ed never came to us to say that it was closing the office. There were rumors, as there had been for decades, but the first certain knowledge we had was seeing the sign Com Ed posted stating the office would be closed on a date certain. Again, SACCC and the community rose in opposition. There was one large public meeting. Com Ed attended through John Hooker and possibly others. Later, there was a meeting at the home of one of SACCC's leaders, Lillian Drummond. Edison made suggestions at that meeting, probably the ones Mr. Falcone refers to on page 11, but accepting those suggestions was tied to SACCC not

continuing to oppose the closing of the Center. They were not made in the spirit of helping Com Ed customers survive the closing of the Center, although they certainly would have mitigated some harm, but in the context of SACCC withdrawing its opposition. SACCC did not reject the suggestions but it did reject a settlement that would allow Com Ed to close the Center without opposition or ICC scrutiny. I recall Com Ed making its settlement suggestions just this one time although Com Ed representatives referred to some or all of these at the City Council hearing. If Com Ed is referring to the settlement discussions held at the behest of the Hearing Examiner I have no comment other than to say it was my understanding that those discussions were confidential.

Q17 Please discuss the adequacy of the 1-800-Edison-1 system.

A17 First, 18 seconds is an average time so, by definition, there are much longer waits on occasion. Even short waits can seem intolerable when, unlike a walk-in office, the person cannot see any progress toward being able to talk to someone. Still these waits are not my main concern with the 1-800 system although, finally, and most importantly, in terms of the delay, it is my understanding that the clock does not begin to run until the caller has successfully navigated Com Ed's complicated menu system, which often is quite problematic. A bigger concern is that Com Ed seems to treat as a successful operation the situation where, for example, the system rejects a customer's request for a deferred payment agreement and hangs up on the customer. I have worked with customers after this has happened and it is my opinion that several of these would have had a successful result, in terms of the customer, had they taken place face-to-face. It is good to see that Com Ed has quality controls in place. However, I wonder how effective those measures really are because they are dependent not only on the customer knowing she was treated improperly or badly but also knowing how to effectively raise this poor treatment. Again, looking to the situation where the automated part of the system rejects a request for deferred payment, one woman thought this was the end, that she could not have such a plan. Fortunately, she came into contact with

someone who referred her to SACCC and she obtained a plan after our advocacy.

Q18 Do you have any further comments regarding the 1-800-Edison1 system?

A18 I believe Reverend Bynum and I addressed this extensively in our initial testimony, but it bears repeating that thinking all people are served as well by an automated/call-in system as by face-to-face interaction is, frankly, laughable.

Q19 Does this conclude your rebuttal testimony?

A19 Yes it does.